

EUROPEAN RESEARCH IN ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM
9TH CONGRESS

9TH CONGRESS



EURAU18 alicante
RETROACTIVE RESEARCH
CONGRESS PROCEEDINGS

ISBN: 978-84-1302-003-7
DOI: 10.14198/EURAU18alicante

Editor: Javier Sánchez Merina
Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)



Titulación de Arquitectura

ESCUELA POLITÉCNICA SUPERIOR Alicante University

Carretera San Vicente del Raspeig s/n 03690 San Vicente del Raspeig. Alicante (SPAIN)

eurau@ua.es

Sprawl Milano

A new laboratory for resilient urbanism

Heidari Afshari, Arian¹

1. Department of Architecture and Urban Studies (DASU), Politecnico di Milano, Milano, Italy, arian.heidari@polimi.it

Synopsis

Via a comparative analysis between areas of sprawl in north and south Milan, tracking undefined voids of the territory as active indicators revealing the level of urban fragmentation and vulnerability, this paper's main debate hinges on the tactical role of such land typologies, resulting alternative proposals toward peri-urban resilience strategies. The goal is to redefine and conceptualize those hidden, ignored and neglected landscape's, niches that contain a fresh strategic layer for the contemporary sprawl to become more resilient in anticipation of future catastrophic conditions.

Key words: Sprawl, Milan, peri-urban, landscape, resilient urbanism.

This paper's main intention is to introduce a fresh gaze into the territory of Milan's sprawl as an example of contemporary European sprawl. The aim is to present a critical lens in order to comprehend better contemporary sprawl and its level of fragmentation and vulnerability. Looking into what we normally miss to observe in sprawl, or what we ignore, or whatever is hidden from our urban eyes, comprises a new tactical layer for analyzing sprawl.

We normally see sprawl superficially because it is too big for our urban eyes. It carries no collective memory, nor an immediate way to imagine it. It is easy to say what sprawl is not rather than what it is. We don't have critical tools to observe, understand, and explain it. Quantitative or object oriented approaches are not sufficient to describe the reality of sprawl and always a more reliable definition with more effective indicators to measure its level of fragmentation in comparison to the city, is desirable, especially the ones which reveal what we normally are not able to see or conceive.

The context which today both elites and popular cultures would recognize as European sprawl, is a relatively developed complex landscape full of urban and rural tissues, entities and materials, with diverse and most often contradictory functional and spatial programs. Gray platforms, industrial strips, heavy infrastructures, international transport hubs, new medium or high density residential extensions, overextended suburban housing, beside historical cores, villages, urban gardens and agricultural and water networks within geographical features of territory, each with different regulations and conflicting codes from one municipality to the next, all together, they portray a labyrinth which more than anything, one can argue is neither a simple "*post-city being prepared on the site of the ex-city*"¹ nor a "*holey plane*"², rather it is a *middle landscape*³ full of complexity and contradiction, solely out of our urban scale of comprehension.

On the northern edges of metropolitan city of Milan, the strips of sprawl from Malpensa to Bergamo Airports⁴, have all the similar elements to the classical definition of American sprawl. They thrive on the culture of consumption, heavy infrastructures and liberal industrial estates, mostly with private and even third sector developers and investors. Yet, the overall condition of their permanence is very contested within a very unique peri-urban landscape. North Milan sprawl itself is very much effected by two dominant systems of the territory; one, deeply rooted in geographical features, generally valleys and rivers oriented north-south, and the other based on the superimposition of infrastructural systems, connecting east to west, intersecting with the more historical ones along the valleys⁵. While effective systems of railways and highways made the flow of both commuters and goods fast and easy, the net of designed destination-system of those infrastructures, presents the image of sprawl which is very difficult to comprehend, especially to understand what happens in-between the nodes as far as using those modes of transportations⁶.

¹ Ref. to Generic City (Koolhaas, 1995)

² The term which used by Lars Lerup to conceptualize the image of Houston sprawl

³ The term which Leo Marx first introduced

⁴ As part of a stretch from Turin to Venice megalopolis which is one of most mature sprawls in all Europe.

⁵ This is the real image of what Boeri, Lanzani and Marini would have called upon as "Il territorio che cambia"

⁶ Ref. to jump-cut urbanism (Ingersoll, 2006)

One can argue that the sprawl in this sense is very much a generic phenomenon, all based on the fast transportation and mobility, reaching the next destination as fast and direct as possible, ignoring what is in-between, or away from the highways or railway lines. However, while sprawl is mostly the result of the flow of populations, goods and materials, there is always a permanence to it. Our urban eyes always look for urban artifacts, urbanity in general and buildups or the otherwise classical hinterland landscape. Our disciplinary minds and tools are not able to see what is in between the two images and the fact that in sprawl none of the two has a clear definition. More importantly our urban eyes fail to observe the fact that the real permanence is what resists as leftovers of the two categories, secured in our perception and collective memories of core cities and hinterlands, projected into our imaginations of sprawl. Interesting enough, exactly those vague, unclear and residual spaces are the ones which decide the fate of the territory confronting any catastrophic future. If there is any room for anticipation and to design and modify the existing condition, one needs to find it in those spaces.

To have a better understanding of this condition, one needs to distance itself from being generic, too much mobile and object/destination oriented toward better investigation of more specific nature of sprawl as such. For instance, a sampling analysis between the areas of sprawl in northern and southern Milan clearly shows the very different nature of the two sides of the metropolis⁷. While the image of the south is much closer to the classical example of metropolitan city and its hinterlands where the city edge almost consolidated by the *Parco Agricolo Sud Milano*⁸, the north is full of diverse undefined voids with a variety of scales in between infrastructures and built-up tissues, where the city seems edgeless. And one can clearly understand that the common ground between the two is not the very visible production of superficial or generic buildups and physical materials of sprawl but it is related to rather deeper structure of the territory where lays a true resilient capacity.

Tracking down in-betweens, residual spaces, vacant lands, neglected spaces and in general undefined voids of the territory can serve as an active indicator for that analysis. The nature of sprawl invites new unconventional methods of description, especially methods which reject the three-dimensional analyses of objects in space, and ignores the typology or morphology of planned built-up areas or voids. These methods do not suffer from a fixation with scale because fundamentally they are based on a deeper exploration of the peri-urban realm of sprawl rather than the distribution of mass objects.

Last but not least, I would like to suggest the deeper exploration of these land typologies as a fresh layer of what the landscape of 21st-century sprawl could be rather what it is; what I would like to call "the ecological interstitial" or what Clément cited as "Third Landscape", should be studied by multidisciplinary approaches, looking into its critical role in the reconstruction of peri-urban resilience strategies. It is therefore vital to conceptualize those hidden, ignored and neglected landscape niches as a multi-functional layer of contemporary sprawl--for instance very similar to De Sola Morales' "Terrain Vague" concept of landscape-- yet investigating it for

⁷ Ref. to Boeri, Lanzani and Marini analysis of south and northern territory of Milan, 1993

⁸ South Milan regional agricultural park, which is under protection and therefore is very much consolidated

its potential in order to address issues of future resilience of the territory.

Bibliography

- BOERI, Stefano, LANZANI, Arturo and MARINI, Edoardo, 1993. Il territorio che cambia - Ambienti, paesaggi e immagini della regione milanese. Milan: Abitare Segesta Cataloghi. ISBN: 8886116179
- CLÉMENT, Gilles, 2004, Manifest of the Third Landscape-undecided fragment of the planetarian garden, Merve Verlag.
- DE SOLA MORALES, Ignasi, 1995. Terrain Vague. In: AnyPlace. London: MIT Press. ISBN: 978-0262540780
- INGERSOLL, Richard, 2006. Sprawltown: Looking for the City on Its Edges. New York: Princeton Architectural Press. ISBN: 978-1568985664
- KOOLHAAS, Rem, 1998. What ever happened to urbanism? In: S,M,L,XL. Rotterdam: The Monacelli Press. ISBN: 978-1885254863
- LERUP, Lars, 2000, After the city, MIT press. ISBN: 9780262122245
- MARX, Leo, 1964, The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America. New York: Oxford University Press.

Biography

Arian Heidai Afsahari. (Kerman, 1984) Iranian Milan-based Architect, he has received his Ph.D. cum laude in architecture, urban and interior design from the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies (DAStU), Politecnico di Milano, Italy. Since 2013, He has been collaborating with DAStU and the School of Architecture, Urban Planning and Construction Engineering (AUIE) at Politecnico di Milano, participating in national and international research and didactic activities, mainly in the architecture and urban design scientific sector. He is a former teaching fellow and regular visiting researcher at Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology (CEPT University), in Ahmedabad, India. His research is mainly focused on the theory and history of the peri-urban territory as well as investigating in multidisciplinary strategies, methods, and tools to analyze and project in the emergent 21st-century sprawl in the Global South.